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ABSTRACT

Collaborative writing is a "messy" process which reveals much about the ways students struggle to write alone as well as with others. Two sections of an undergraduate college writing class were assigned a collaborative essay, to be written in small groups. In many groups, students could not negotiate or communicate with each other. The process notes of six students in two such "dysfunctional" groups reveal some student strategies for negotiating authority in co-writing groups, and suggest what those strategies mean for these writers as individuals. One of the most difficult tasks for first-year students is making the leap between writing that is purely expressive, and writing which is analytic. The problem is not that students are unable to think in these ways; rather, it may be that they do not see that this kind of thinking is applicable to their own writing. For most students, opinion and emotion are much the same thing, so negotiating about writing makes very little sense. Their inability to work with each other thus helps to explain their difficulties when faced with individual writing tasks which ask them to interpret information or construct arguments. Discussion of the difficulties collaboration entails could be a way to make critical thinking seem more real for the students, and suggest ways by which they can, through negotiating with each other, begin to write beyond the rather claustrophobic confines of "self." Whatever its frustrations, writing with others can teach students a great deal about the writing they do as individuals. (PRA)

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"Negotiation, Authority and Confidence: Freshmen Writers Collaborate"

When asked to relate her thoughts after participating in the writing of a collaborative essay, one of my first-year students wrote:

> I feel that my 'voice' as seen in my writing is personal ...difficulties arise when I'm not able to take a topic which can somehow identify with me. I faced this difficulty when I was writing the group essay. I felt violated because I was compromising my technique with my group. I hope to overcome this problem in the future...Once I am comfortable with writing with other people I believe that I will learn a great deal more about writing by myself.

Her response reflects both the difficulties and the rewards of co-writing in a undergraduate writing class, a messy process which reveals much about the ways students struggle to write alone as well as with others. This paper will examine some student strategies for negotiating authority in co-writing groups, and will discuss what those strategies imply for these writers as individuals.

First, a bit of background. My own interest in collaborative writing began in January of 1990, when I read about Ken Kesey's experiment in which he and thirteen of his creative writing students co-authored a novel. Kesey discussed the unique opportunity co-writing provides students, that of watching each other compose.

I decided to assign a collaborative essay to my section of College Writing (twenty undergraduates, all first year students) in the Spring of 1990, and repeated the assignment the next Fall, this time with forty students. For their essay, each group was to analyze some phenomenon at which they could take a critical look. I suggested that they take their topics from from the culture around them--something on campus, on television, on the radio--things about which I assumed they would be expert. For a week before the actual writing began, we discussed possible topics in class and strategies for examining same.

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Each group contained three or four students, assigned on the basis of my perception of their skill as writers, and on their own own estimation of their skill as reported to me in self-evaluations and conferences. I tried to find writers who would complement each other--to pair highly organized writers, for instance, with writers whose work generally lacked focus; I avoided creating single sex groups, and tried to avoid creating groups whose members would dislike each other intensely. Not wanting to dictate the way the groups would operate, I did not tell the students why I had placed them as I had. I asked that they write a page of process notes after each group meeting, and respond to a questionnaire I would give them after their group essay was finished.

It was my hope that the stronger, more confident writers would act as models for their less confident peers, and that, in the best social constructivist tradition, everyone would become more willing to accept the different styles and opinions that would inevitably arise within each group. Sometimes this happened. Some groups discussed their topics freely, and negotiated differences of opinion. The strong writers exerted a certain amount of authority; the weaker writers gained a certain amount of authority by having their input taken seriously by their groups.

But more often the groups acted in ways that I hadn't expected. Not only were students not able to negotiate; they weren't even able to communicate. Few students reported any gain in confidence--all inconvenient facts, given the projected title of my paper.

However, the more I looked at the what students had to say about their experiences, the more interesting the records of these "dysfunctional" groups began to seem. Perhaps I could use the <u>interpersonal</u> difficulties my students faced in their groups as a way of understanding the <u>intrapersonal</u> difficulties

so many of them faced as individual writers, specifically their difficulties with writing tasks which require them to analyze or integrate information from an outside source.

To this end, I'd like to focus on the process notes of six students. The first group I'll introduce you to contained two men and one woman: Holly, Peter, and Carl (not their real names).

Holly thought of herself as a writer who was blocked, but potentially fluent. Peter, a highly creative writer, told me that teachers had often said his work promised great things, but didn't deliver--Peter cheerfully admitted that he was "lazy." Carl completed the group, a highly motivated, highly organized writer who was producing essays of which he was quite proud, but who was struggling to overcome a certain rigidity in his style.

Things started well; the three selected "modern art on campus" as their topic, and began finding out about certain sculptures dotting the UMass landscape. But as the project progressed, it became clear that the group wasn't getting along. The extent of their trouble is revealed in excerpts from their process writing.

In a "best case/worst case scenario," produced before the groups were assigned, Holly wrote, "Most of all, everyone has to enjoy talking and writing about the topic. Even if there's one person who is bored or uninterested it won't produce what it should." This was, unfortunately, the position in which Holly soon found herself. "Art is not my hobby," she writes; "working with my group showed me that it's hard to be interested in something that you don't care about. I would rather write my own paper the way I want to, just have other people give their opinions on it...I won't co-write if I could help it ever again. I really hated it." Peter's experiece was slightly better, though not

entirely positive. "Working with other people makes a paper impersonal," he writes; "I really don't like writing papers with other people unless it is a boring subject or a research paper."

Carl's responses were the most painful. "In this essay my writing seemed too dominant and overbearing to my co-workers so I had to change my style to a more passive voice. Now that I think about it, I should have raised them to my standard instead of lowering myself to theirs; of course, the second is so much easier." The passive role Carl adopted led to some strangely passive aggressive behavior: he sarcastically refers to the group essay as "Peter's brainchild," and by the second week, he writes,

> I was beginning to feel that I was doing everything, but I refuse to write this paper by myself...I don't want Peter and Holly to know how much I have written because I know they will say, 'OK, well, why don't we just hand that in?'...I will work on the paper some more so I can have an emergency back up final draft for when Peter and Holly realize they have nothing at the last minute.

What stands out most strongly in this group's responses is the lack of communication between the group members. Instead of negotiating with each other, they pour their frustration into their notes, private communications intended for me. It's only in their notes that they can say what they're thinking, not to each other.

Conditions weren't much better in another group, this one made up of two women and one man: Ed, Lucy, and Marian. Ed was a writer who felt strongly about his ideas, but who had a strange ambivalence about his ability to convey them convincingly. Lucy was meticulously organized, but had trouble generating original material. Marian was a powerhouse: an outspoken woman with a definite political agenda to advance, she was a highly skilled, very confident writer.

After much struggle, the group decided to analyze socially approved tokens of male and female gender identity, a topic that might have been fruitful, given the fact that these students differed in their beliefs about proper roles for men and women. Instead, their differences of opinion produced irreconcilable arguments. Lucy writes that collaboration has taught her that "I have my own opinion, and just because it's different, it doesn't mean that it's not right."

The differences of opinion that Lucy briefly refers to surface in much clearer form in Marian's notes. She writes, "I feel like we're an old machine which runs for awhile and then within a matter of minutes grinds to a halt and then needs someone to oil us. The problem is we get temporary solutions to much more constant problems that always come up again."

Unlike Carl in the previous group, Marian was quite willing to take charge. Before the essay begins, she writes

> I think that the best that could happen is that I get in a group and they are for the most part apathetic and I get to take control and the body of the writing turns out to be mostly mine. The worst case is a scenario where we try to come togther to analyze something and we clash and I don't back down and then either I wind up writing the bulk of the essay myself, or we compromise and wind up with a mediocre body of work.

For Marian, being in control is the best case scenario; having to fight for the control she takes is the worst. In either case, she's decided that she will be in control, no matter what, before the process begins. About group functions, Marian writes, "At the first starts of the paper I was doing most of the writing, and most of the thinking, but eventually I just refused to do all the work and Ed and Lucy took over some. One time Ed and Lucy did some work on their own and we wound up tossing all of what they had written." "I have learned," she writes, "that I have a hard time working with those who are not

at an equal level of thought as me...it's really hard to discuss these things with people who haven't really thought about them." The stance Marian takes is that of traditional teacher, a position she adopts more explicitly later on when she writes: "Today I think I started to teach an 'Opression 101' class."

It's a class that the other group members are rather surprised to find themselves enrolled in. "Often I felt like I was getting lectured to when somebody was in no position to do so," says Ed. At one point, he views a film about the portrayal of women in advertising at the group's prompting: "They both seemed glad I'd seen it, but left it pretty much at that. They didn't seem to want to use many of the ideas in the writing. Okay, what? Are they trying to teach me a lesson?" At the end of the essay, Ed writes:

> Collaboration simply defined many life situations for me. What I mean is if I am forced to give into my environment, and give up my own personal style, I have failed as a person. Collaboration forced me to start over and do things the way someone else wanted me to do them. There was a point when I was only there because I knew we had to get done, and giving in was the only way to do so.

One group experiences chilly silence, the other explosive conflict; neither are able to negotiate with each other about how their essay will be written. Why should this be so? Is the problem that these groups were ones which I had formed? I don't think so; Erika reports similar problems in her classes with groups who had self-selected. Certain responses to the questionnaire completed after the groups had disbanded provide a clue about why these groups worked as they did.

The first question on my sheet was one I had borrowed from Erika; it asked the students to describe their personal theory of writing.

The first group--Holly, Peter, and Carl--provided me with these definitions: Holly said,"Writing enables people to put their emotions on paper

when they can't say what they mean. People are used to read a rough draft and then give their opinion. The only materials I feel a writer needs are a piece of paper and a pen."

Peter wrote, "Some say writing is not an art form but only a means of communication--I feel it is an art form--a way of using a paint brush. Someone can show their deepest emotions in an artful way."

And Carl: "Writing is emotions. To write these emotions on paper accurately, you must experience them."

Given these definitions, it becomes evident why this group couldn't negotiate: their beliefs about writing eliminate the possibility of compromise, since any shift in postion involves a move away from emotional authenticity; "emotion" provides its own unquestionable authority, and their stiffness becomes silence.

Inflexibility characterized Ed, Lucy, and Marian's group as well. Lucy neglects to answer my question, but Ed does:

> My personal theory of writing is that writing is most importantly for myself...I don't think my writing is the place for other people to form a conclusion on life, but instead a place for other people to see how I would make a conclusion. And often in my papers I lead up to that but cut it off right at the point before the conclusion...as I like to write for myself, I couldn't figure out what was the point of this essay.

Ed closes down possibilities for negotiation by assuming that writing exists solely as personal performance, a sort of meta-argument that doesn't <u>come</u> to conclusions, but merely illustrates how Ed <u>might</u> come to a conclusion--not, he adds, that he ever does. Since Ed refuses either to reach his own conclusions or to attempt to influence those of other people, he sees "giving in" to Marian as his only option.

Marian defines writing in a broader way, observing that "We should be

using what we gain from the questions posed to us by others; it is essential that we explore our motivations and reasoning for how and what we write."

Expansive as her definition is, Marian seems singularly unable to put it into practice. Exchanges of opinion were emphatically one-sided in her group, with Marian taking the fact that her colleagues did not share her thoughts on the group topic as an indication that they had no thoughts about the topic. Nowhere does she exhibit the ability, or even the willingness, to question, enlarge, or expand her existing opinions.

I've chosen to discuss these two groups not only because their responses were eloquent; they were also symptomatic. The majority of students from my classes and from Erika's who disliked the collaborative assignment defined writing much as does Carl, or Holly, or Ed, or Peter: as a personal expression of emotion. Were their problems only phenomena of the collaborative assigment I had given them, discussion could end here, and collaborative writing could be dismissed as merely a bad idea. But they're not. The problems that these students had in their groups are in many cases the same problems that hinder them as individual writers.

One of the more difficult tasks for first year students is making the leap between writing that is purely expressive, and writing which is analytic. Many students, it seems, lack the ability to think critically, to support their own opinions, and to evaluate the opinions of others. The teaching task often becomes that of presenting various techniques: discrete, self-contained exercises, intended to help students achieve the kind of intellectual breadth and maturity they'll need in their university careers. However, though students may go through the motions, too often it seems that they're not interpreting what they're doing in class as a way of perceiving the world, but rather merely

as a series of steps they must perform to successfully complete our assignments.

The experience of the first year students I've discussed suggests that the problem isn't that students are unable to think in these ways; rather, it may be that they don't see that this kind of thinking is applicable to their own writing. For the majority of students in my classes as well as in Erika's, "opinion" and "emotion" are much the same thing, monolithic givens best left unexamined. To students holding these views, negotiating about writing makes as little sense as negotiating about the color of their eyes; why talk about it, when no change is possible? Their inability to work with each other thus helps to explain their difficulties when faced with individual writing tasks which ask them to interpret information or construct arguments: since emotions are unquestionable, and opinion unchangable, any writing task becomes essentially reportage of "what I think, what I feel"--a kind of internal weather forecast that audiences are asked to receive without comment. "Opinion" and "emotion" are internally despotic, but remain powerless in the outside world.

The interpersonal nature of collaboration makes these problems apparent to students not as abstractions, but as inescapable facts. Students in co-writing groups are obliged to take each others' contributions far more seriously than those involved in other group activities--peer editing, for instance, in which the groups' suggestions can be easily ignored. Shutting out or overpowering the contributions of co-writers involves a greater amount of effort; what's more, it produces its own written record both in the text of the collaborative essay itself and in process notes, making visible, both to teacher and students, the difficulties involved in negotiation.

I don't wish to suggest that students who engage in co-writing projects will be able to immediately use their experience to enrich their own writing;

however, discussion of the difficulties collaboration entails could be a way to make the ins and outs of critical thinking seem much more real for our students, as well as suggest ways by which they can, through negotiating with each other, begin to write beyond the rather claustrophobic confines of "self." Whatever its frustrations, I agree with the student whose words opened this paper--writing with others can teach students a great deal about the writing they do as individuals.